

WHY DIACONAL SERVICE IS SO VITAL

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I'm very grateful to *Deacon Digest* for inviting me to contribute to your special issue on ministry to families.

I've been thinking a great deal about families lately, for obvious reasons. Soon, in Philadelphia, we host Pope Francis for the World Meeting of Families. Next month (October) in Rome, I'll be a delegate to the Synod of Bishops, where our work will focus on "The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World."

The more I study the theology of the family, the more I realize that it's also an essential theme for the theology of the diaconate. Let me explain.

In 2002, the Vatican's International Theological Commission published *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, a detailed review of the history and theology of the diaconate. As the commission observed, "Through the incarnation of the Word who is God and by whom all was made . . . the strangest revolution imaginable has come about. The Kyrios—Lord— becomes the *diakonos*—servant—of all."

The *Kyrios* has become the *diakonos*. If we wanted to summarize the entire Gospel message in six words, we could hardly do better. The point is that deacons are ordained to be visible signs and icons of our Lord's self-gift, his humility and *diakonos*.

Think of it this way: Deacon Bill Ditewig has noted several times that when Pope Francis washes feet on Holy Thursday, he removes his chasuble and rearranges his stole, so that everyone can see the Pope wearing his stole diagonally in the diaconate style. The Pope is witnessing to the suffering Christ and the servant Church, and in this iconic moment, he uses *diaconal* attire to underline the point.

For the theology of the family, I commend to you a short, readable catechism about sexuality, marriage, and the family published earlier this year, in anticipation of Pope Francis' 2015 visit. You can find *Love Is Our Mission: The Family Fully Alive* on Amazon or on the World Meeting of Families website.

This little book discusses Ephesians 5, where Paul likens the covenant between Christ and the Church to a marriage. Just as Christ sacrificed himself for the Church, Ephesians 5 calls husbands and wives to mutual self-sacrifice. When a man and a woman love one another through joys and hardships—not only enjoying each other in the honeymoon moments, but forgiving and serving one another in the inevitable sloughs and crises—then marriage is at its most "diaconal," for in those moments marriage truly echoes our Lord's own humility and mercy.

The Catholic diaconate and sacramental marriage are two distinct but closely allied ways that we save our lives by losing them, two ways of testifying that we've all been created

for a communion built on loving service. Our *Kyrios* was a *diakonos*, and every area of our lives is implicated.

When Christians want to know the appropriate expressions of our sexuality, we look to Christ's humility and service. Our marriage covenants—like God's covenant with Israel—mean that we don't abandon our promises when the going gets tough. Our marriage covenants—like Christ's covenant with the Church—always rely on God's grace as the engine for self-giving. The marriage sacrament has an intrinsically diaconal character.

Today's world urgently needs the witness of deacons and families founded in sacramental marriages. The questions and challenges of family life can seem overwhelming. Divorce, cohabitation, pre- and extra-marital sex, pornography, abortion, certain reproductive technologies, same-sex marriage, and a pervasive contraceptive mentality: all of these issues crowd the American pastoral landscape. These issues are interrelated. They have their roots in an unhealthy, excessive individualism. The uniquely modern threats to marriage and family life can be traced to individuals selfishly pursuing their appetites and entitlements. Sin and tragedy have always been complex. Pastoral encounters have always required patience. But the peculiar mark of our own times is how modern men and women *instinctively* resist moral restraints. The ideology of modern consumer culture is a counter-catechesis, teaching us to be "autonomous," to be obligated to no one, and to see sex mainly as a means of pleasure and self-expression, with no higher meaning.

About the only sexual ethic our de-sacralized society can agree upon is consent. We hear again and again in our mass media that whatever consenting adults agree upon is acceptable as a matter of personal moral choice. In practice though, this ethic translates into patterns of thinking and behavior that not only overlook the needs of children, the vulnerable, and the weak, but also perpetuate a bias toward selfishness. There's no special dignity to postmodern sexuality, no summons to serve a vision greater than the self.

This is why we need to give thanks for the *Kyrios* who became a *diakonos*. In this new and demanding mission field, we have a pressing need for deacons and faithful sacramental marriages. Why? The answer is simple. By their witness, they create safe havens for those who seek to be fully "human"—human as God intended us to be. Their example, lived with joy and fidelity, shows the world what the Christian alternative to a purposeless life looks like.

Vatican II not only restored the permanent diaconate, but it also renewed the patristic sense of the *Ecclesia domestica*. The "domestic church" is the fruit of a sacramental marriage. In a domestic church, parents raise children to offer their lives to the Lord, teaching young ones to pray and understand their lives in terms of the drama of salvation. A family like this is oriented towards parish life. And a parish with a critical mass of loving Christian families will truly become a "family of families," a community formed of many domestic churches.

This is the soil where family ministry can really take root. A well-led Catholic parish will see itself as a “diaconal” community; a network of domestic churches serving one another. Deacons and their families are uniquely suited to be the seeds for this kind of ministry, acting as hosts and taking the practical, welcoming, and serving steps to cultivate a Catholic spirit of fellowship. I could list dozens of such “diaconal” parishes as examples. In one parish, a father lost his job. His family faced financial ruin. But they belonged to a solid family prayer group, with other families like themselves who’d spent serious time building their spiritual lives together. When crisis hit, the other families stepped in and helped pay the bills to bridge a time of uncertainty.

In another parish, a marriage was threatened by the wife’s alcoholism. This time, the family was part of a longstanding Bible study group. Its members came forward to help the wife attend her AA meetings, and to ensure that the husband had plenty of practical support during her struggle to recover.

I know of many good parish ministries that do wonderful work in helping new, first-time or troubled mothers. I also thank God for the many parish men’s groups who meet for spiritual fellowship—and whose men hold each other accountable as Christian fathers and husbands.

For these ministries to flourish, mature leadership is required, somebody with the right catechetical formation and spiritual temperament.

This is why diaconal service is so vital. Deacons have the *diakonos* spirituality. They have—or rather we have, since I’m very proud of the diaconal identity I share with my deacon brothers—the grace and power and discipline of holy orders. And many permanent deacons also have one other intimate, priceless gift: the personal experience of sacramental marriage and daily life inside the “domestic church.”

The lesson is this. We’ve reached a moment in the history of the Church and our culture when deacons are uniquely gifted to serve. We need men with the courage and generosity to love as Jesus Christ himself loved. So step forward and lead, brother deacons: our families and our world need you.

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